DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 146 CS 213 231

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TITLE Implementing Control Theory: One Point of Light.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Spring Conference of the American Association of Colleges and Teacher Education/Association of Teacher Educators (Little Rock, AR, April 1-2, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; *Oral History; *Writing Improvement; Writing Instruction; Writing Research; *Writing Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Writing

ABSTRACT

A collaborative, oral-history, writer's workshop was held in an undergraduate college reading class. Sixty-five students each taped an interview on literacy life-experiences with a self-described reluctant reader at the middle or high school level, and wrote a narrative based on the interview. Students worked together in groups on their narratives, then worked through first drafts, editing, and polishing, and finally published a monograph of their narratives. The teacher analyzed two data sources: the monograph, and field notes written following each workshop meeting by the teacher with corrections and amplifications by students. Cognitive mapping as well as clustering and connections techniques were used to establish eight categories of student reactions to writer's workshops. Results showed that writer's workshops: (1) help students cross personal boundaries; (2) force students to take a more active interest in their product; (3) help students learn about the editing process; (4) help students search for meaning in their writing; (5) help students handle peer criticism; (6) motivate students to become more effective writers; (7) help students overcome frustrations in their writing; and (8) help students build bridges to the future. The workshop experience supported the idea that oral history writing workshops change the way students write, and change students' attitudes and feelings toward writing. Such workshops should transfer well to elementary and secondary language arts and social studies classes, and to remedial classes as well. (Twenty references are attached.) (SR)

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ED343146

Implementing Control Theory: One Point of Light

A Paper Presented to
The AACTE/ATE Spring Conference
April 1-2, 1992
Little Rock, AR

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Implementing Control Theory: One Point of Light

The argument has essentially been that an effective step toward quality schools would be to make changes in instructional methodology. Glasser (1990) joins other critical theorists (Freire & Macedo 1987; Giroux, 1987) by suggesting a huge restructuring of basic educational practice based on control theory and managed by lead managers (p.103) i.e. teachers. Glasser goes on to acknowledge there are many details to be worked out. This article addresses one such detail; an alternate pedagogical paradigm supported by critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989), and delineated as a collaborative, oral-history, writer's workshop (Wigginton 1987).

This article presents a way teachers (lead managers) can create a classroom context that allows students to become more effective writers by writing about life-experiences and exchanging ideas about their writing. The article is based on data collected during a workshop-study held late in 1991, and is divided into the following parts. First, the article describes the circumstances and structure of the workshop. Second, the article explains how the author collected, triangulated, and analyzed the data for the study. Third, the paper looks at the findings of the study. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for writing instruction and closes with an explanation of why the author

believes writer's workshops should have a place in the curriculum of a quality school. The first section partially describes the circumstances surrounding the workshop.

Circumstances

The teacher held the workshop in 1991 on a college campus in a southern state. Sixty-five female undergraduate college students in a reading class wrote narratives on literacy life-experiences collected from oral history tapes (Ives, 1987) during interviews with sixty-five student-selected respondents. The college students interviewed forty-six middle and nineteen high school self-described reluctant-readers. The reluctant-readers were defined by the college students as public school students who can read, but for various reasons do not or will not read school introduced reading material. Judy interviewed Tommy, a middle school, self-described non-reader. Maurine interviewed Martha, a high school student and product of elementary school remedial programs. These two examples characterize the remaining interviews. The following section partially describes the structure of the workshop.

Structure

The college students discussed several items pertaining to the interviews during the first workshop meeting. They learned how to use a tape recorder and brainstormed about questions to prime the interviews, deciding to allow other questions to emerge during the interview. They also discussed several steps to start writing their narrative,

such as making a transcript or listening to the tapes several times. After the students completed the interviews, they used their interview information to write a narrative, and brought a first draft to class. They divided into groups and worked together on their narratives (Comstock, 1982), exchanging oral readings and constructive comments until everyone had an opportunity to read and receive feedback.

The students devoted the next few class periods to "editing" sessions. The teacher participated only to the extent that when the students wanted help, individual writing problems were "fixed" in conference (Murray, 1987). The teacher offered suggestions, but always left final decisions with students. The students used the last few workshop days to "polish" their drafts, one last reading for typos, and then brought final drafts to the last workshop meeting where they published a monograph of their narratives. When the workshop was over, the teacher took time to reflect on the data.

Working with the data

The teacher used two data sources. Field notes were written following each workshop meeting to capture the events in the workshops (Spradley, 1980). These notes were mailed to four students chosen at random to read, make corrections or amplifications, and return. The students returned the notes with alterations which were added to the data. The teacher used the students' monograph as a second data resource. The teacher used an inductive process (Glaser &

Strauss, 1967) to analyze the data by reading it several times, searching in particular for what the students said concerning writing, and made rough personal notes pursuing categories. The teacher then used cognitive mapping techniques to internalize existing categories, and clustering and connections techniques to refine the emerging categories (Jones, 1985). In looking at the data, the following eight categories emerged that the teacher deemed important to the idea of improving student writing.

Findings

The first is that writer's workshops help students cross personal boundaries. Mary Jane, a thirty year-old, non-traditional student seeking elementary certification, did not view herself as a writer before enrolling in the reading class. "I hardly ever write. I'm not a writer." The fact Mary Jane enrolled in college suggests she wanted to improve her life, and consequently, improve her reading and writing skills for certification. Writing was too much trouble in Mary Jane's life before college, "It's easier to use the phone." However, she did schedule writing time during the workshop, "I'm setting aside time to write in my journal." Conceivably, Mary Jane found enough enjoyment in writing during the workshop to write at other times. She came to see herself more as a writer because of the writing she did in the workshop, "Writing this paper is more fun than I

thought." This suggests that workshops help students like Mary Jane cross boundaries (Rose, 1989), and see themselves more as writers.

The second is that peer collaboration forces students to take a more active interest in their product. Maurine found herself sharing writing with someone other than a teacher during the workshop. The first day she did not think anyone would want to read her writing, "I write reports for class, but who else would want to read my writing, other than a teacher?" During the workshop Maurine collaborated and shared writings with peers, "This was a new experience for me. I never let anyone read my assignments before I turned them in." Collaboration compelled Maurine to expand her audience beyond what she had been accustomed. As Graves (1983) points out collaboration almost always leads to a more effective writing product. "Sharing my writing gave me a keener awareness of audience. When this happened, I wanted my writing to be good. I wanted my peers to like what I wrote. It became for me much more than a writing assignment." What others had to say about Maurine's writing helped her develop more interest in writing. This suggests Maurine changed her mind and gained a certain type of new knowledge.

The third is that writer's workshops help students learn about the editing process. When Tracy came to the reading class, she understood her writing process as being either right or wrong. She did not have knowledge of editing as a

process to improve writing. She recognized only the extremes on the writing continuum; "right" at one extremity and "wrong" at the other. "I try to do right when I write, but I seldom get it right. I was taught in high school there is a correct and incorrect way to write. It's either correct or it's not. That's just the way it is." This suggests Tracy thought her first efforts were her best efforts. However, she received editing help from peers during the workshop, "After listening to others I could see where change would improve my story." Her acceptance of peer suggestions is not surprising. Calkins (1986) claims that students accept peer suggestions quicker than teacher suggestions. This suggests that Tracy more readily accepted peer suggestions because her personal values were not threatened.

The fourth is that writer's workshops help students search for meaning in their writing. Louise brought to the workshop an understanding that her feelings about writing played a determinate role in differentiating effective and non-effective writing. Writing with feeling produced more effective writing, "If it does not have my feelings in it, then to me, it's not 'real writing.'" Louise wrote with feeling, but had trouble transferring meaning in her writing to peers. She directed first efforts toward herself, but only she understood parts of her narrative. Louise learned during collaboration that others did not understand her writing. Her narrative did evolve during editing, however, to a point where peers better understood. As Atwell (1987)

points out, understanding plays a positive role in students' acceptance that meaning in writing is as important as content. The workshop did not change Louise's attitude about feelings, but it did help her understand she could turn feelings into more effective writing through collaboration and editing when she discussed feelings with peers.

The fifth is that writer's workshops help students handle peer criticism. Lee Ann was not ready for criticism, and did not want to rewrite her paper. "Writing is such a trauma. Write, criticize, rewrite, etc. It really seems like more work than it's worth. I don't want to write anymore. Give me a science experiment or math problem any day. At least with them one knows when they have finished, and usually if it's right." Lee Ann's pain increased as the editing process continued. "Today, I received some constructive criticism. However, while watching her dissect my paper, I felt pain. As she wrote, the pain increased." Lee Ann's feelings spring from the writing knowledge she brought to the workshop. Yet, the criticism changed her writing perspective. At first, she thought writing was an exclusive process, but during the workshop, came to know that easy writing is not self-rewarding. In the end, Lee Ann realized the truth in Murray's (1987) statement that effective writing is hard work and requires more effort than ineffective writers are willing to put forth. "As I evaluate this, I realize that to be criticized is painful, but necessary."

The sixth is that writer's workshops affectively motivate students to become more effective writers. The more students made decisions about what they were doing, the more they were motivated to continue their efforts. Nelda would not write at first. She had the desire to write, had written effectively in her private journals, but became frustrated with her inability to produce writing for peers. "I've been writing since my marriage broke down. I used to sit in my Ozark cabin all by my lonesome and write my heart out. Now, I have trouble. I guess I can't write." The terror of writing affects people in different ways. Because writing is probably students' most disciplined form of thinking (Rose, 1989), it follows that how they think scares them and affects their way of writing. In Nelda's case, her fear of a "writing block" objectifies an internal psychological response into something real. The inability to produce words was very important and production equaled success. She used the tape recordings as a catalysis to help produce words with the encouragement of peers. At the end, Nelda had produced a final draft and progressed through what Atchity (1986) calls "a translated experience."

The seventh is that writer's workshops help students overcome frustrations in their writing. Susie is typical that she does not often employ writing in daily activities. She can write if writing is generously enough defined. During the workshop, she did not understand her feeling of frustration or dissatisfaction after writing, "I would write

more if what I wrote made any sense. I get so frustrated when I read what I write. I'm ashamed to let anyone else read it." Since Gould (1989) claims that we will write only if we find self-value in it, Susie's beginning writing efforts were directed toward self-value; she was not satisfied with product. When she began to respond to peer-comment, she opened herself to a message that she could go beyond a mere writing of individual words, and began to perceive meaning in her writing.

The eighth is that writer's workshops help students build bridges to the future. The students brought a final written narrative of the oral interviews and bound them in book form on the last workshop meeting. Alice shares her feelings about this transition. "Since I was a little girl, writing is something I always wanted to do, but I thought I never had the talent for it. Being able to write a story and see it in print is really exciting." In these sentences, Alice reawakens a feeling of implicit and joyous anticipation she missed for a long time. "Although I felt I knew it by heart after all the editing, I slowly read each line. It may sound silly, but my first thought was 'I can't wait to show it to Mom.'" Clearly, Alice felt renewed, that effective writing made her feel better. She used an awareness of a potential audience to shake up her generative, critical, and expressive capabilities simultaneously, therefore extending psychological growth through writing.

Conclusions

This workshop supported Wigginton's (1987) claim that oral-history workshops will change the way students write. Several students in this workshop did not write much, were seldom around others who did, and did not think they were good writers before the workshops. What these students remembered about public school writing instruction influenced prior knowledge about writing. For example, the ineffective writers seemed to think writing was a one-time process. The collaborative process during the workshop changed many students' minds about this and helped them realize that effective writing is not necessarily a one-time process. Other students brought adverse concepts about themselves as writers. These students did not think they were or could be effective writers. The collaborative effort during the workshop helped these ineffective writers change their attitudes toward writing. The collaboration process seems to have had a metamorphosis effect on their feelings and attitudes toward writing.

The workshop also supported Vygotsky 's (1978) theory that one learns from another regardless of context or learning level. For example, several students learned from others different ways to transfer text meaning. They became more aware of what they were writing during collaboration because peers read their writing. Collaboration helped them to write more effectively because they wanted to impress peers. Thus, students who applaud and positively reinforce

writing enhance their peers to become more successful writers. During collaboration the more experienced writers rose to the challenge and helped the less experienced writers. A sense of self pride and accomplishment in writing emerged during the collaboration, and peer collaboration was responsible for extending self knowledge about writing. Consequently, the rational, meaningful, and positive practice of writing through collaborative editing sessions should increase the quality of student writing.

A step toward quality

The workshop described allows teachers to reinvent traditional, structured instructional methodology and strengthen their position against external challenges to their expertise in the classroom. In Glasser's quality schools, lead managers employing oral-history workshops will find that personal ownership in writing can be raised to a higher level when students are allowed to share their knowledge by writing about life experiences. Thus, students at all instructional levels should be given opportunities to write personal choice stories, and share them with others in groups. In addition, lead managers will find that allowing students to write in a context that does not restrain interest in learning new ways of writing will improve the quality of writing. Although this practice is not common in today's public schools, similar efforts have proven effective in higher education (King, 1989) and non-academic situations (Phillips, 1992).

In closing, these efforts should transfer quite well to elementary and middle school language arts, reading, and English classes as well as secondary English social studies classes. Students in remedial and/or developmental literacy classes should also benefit from the writer's workshop approach to learning. Thus, teachers interested in Glasser's quality school concepts should consider including collaborative oral-history narrative workshops in their new curriculum.

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